

# Mauritania

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## Freedom of the Press

Mauritania's media environment remained constrained in 2013, though the country is beginning to move past a history of dictatorship and the 2008 ouster of the first democratically elected president by General Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz. Abdel Aziz, who subsequently held and won a general election in 2009, has passed a number of positive media reforms.

Article 10 of the 1991 constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, thought, and expression. Legal and regulatory reforms enacted in 2006 eliminated the requirement for prepublication government approval for newspapers, established journalists' legal right to protect sources, and created the High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Sector (HAPA). In 2011, parliament approved amendments to the 2006 Press Freedom Law that abolished prison sentences for slander and defamation, including speech about heads of state, though fines can still be imposed for these offenses. However, cases are brought against journalists infrequently, and none were reported in 2013. Following revelations that a Mauritanian hacker had launched a spate of cyberattacks against Israel in May 2013, parliament proposed a new cybercrime bill that would establish a framework to regulate digital information, impose new penalties on digital offenses, and support the development of new technologies. Lawmakers cited the alleged need to "preserve public order" and "maintain morality," but the bill came under scrutiny by bloggers concerned with infringement on digital media. The status of the draft legislation was unclear at year's end. Mauritania has no legislation guaranteeing access to information.

In addition to its regulatory role, HAPA is responsible for nominating the heads of public media outlets and the Mauritanian News Agency. The HAPA's board members are appointed in consultation with media associations and journalist groups, a departure from the previous practice of presidential appointments. In March 2013, the Ministry of Communications liberalized certain broadcasting regulations, and also granted licenses to five additional radio stations and three television stations ahead of a transition to digital broadcasting. Some opposition members maintained that the allocation of permits favored progovernment political and tribal interests.

Though the media express a variety of views, journalists practice a degree of self-censorship in their coverage of sensitive issues such as the military, foreign diplomatic missions, slavery, corruption, and Sharia (Islamic law). Media outlets generally do not stray far from official reports, including in their coverage of the 2013 parliamentary and municipal elections, which opposition parties boycotted on grounds of fraud.

Mauritanian journalists are subject to some harassment while covering popular protests and when disseminating news deemed "troublesome" to the authorities. In April and August 2013, reporters were not easily able to cover police beatings of demonstrators that followed a series of strikes by miners, dock workers, and other day laborers advocating for wage increases and better working conditions. The journalists who did gain access to the strikes had their cameras confiscated by the police, who then sent all press away before dispersing the protestors with tear gas. Foreign reporters are prevented from openly covering certain subjects, such as slavery—a reported 10 to 20 percent of people in Mauritania are enslaved—and therefore must operate clandestinely. In 2012, a team of CNN journalists had to evade government minders in order to conduct secret interviews on the practice of slavery.

Extralegal violence and intimidation toward journalists has decreased over the past several years, but there were reports in 2013 of security forces attacking and detaining reporters due to their coverage of sensitive topics. In August, security forces arrested Babbah Weld Abidine, a blogger and correspondent for the website *Mourasiloun*, after he inquired about a rape case in which relatives of the victim accused the public prosecutor's office of releasing the rapist without charges. The Journalists' Union of Mauritania claimed that 14 other journalists were victims of aggression in early 2013.

Mauritania has experienced an unprecedented opening of the media sector since 2011, although financial constraints and capacity issues mean that independent media remain underdeveloped in practice. The government owns two daily newspapers, the French-language *Horizons* and the Arabic-language *Chaab*, which circulate alongside dozens of independent print outlets. HAPA provides subsidies to several independent newspapers, and most papers have access to the state's printing press. The government's 51-year monopoly on broadcast media formally ended in 2011 when HAPA announced the creation of new independent television and radio operations. Domestic media continued to diversify as three new private television stations hit the airwaves in 2013, bringing the total number of private outlets to five. This process was expedited by the government's willingness to use its own media production company, launched in 2012, to let public and private television channels broadcast. A public television station that began broadcasting in 2008 carries programs in the country's minority languages—Pular, Soninke, and Wolof—and Mauritians have access to international satellite television. There are five radio stations operating—two public and three private—while several international radio stations are rebroadcast locally, including Radio France Internationale, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Arabic, and Al Jazeera.

In recent years, the Information Ministry has taken positive measures toward improving the quality of Mauritanian journalism. A growing focus on the promotion and empowerment of female journalists led to over 60 women benefiting from various types of journalistic training during 2012. The ministry also organized workshops on election coverage best practices in conjunction with HAPA, international donors, and members of Mauritanian media in advance of 2013 municipal and parliamentary elections.

Internet access is not generally restricted by the government, but penetration was just over 6 percent in 2013. However, mobile-telephone subscriptions are within the reach of more than 93 percent of the population. The impact of online media has grown in recent years, but existing legislation does not address emergent internet-based journalism.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Partly Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

48

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

## **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

19

## **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

15